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RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1611
RUEATRS/TREASURY WASHDC
RUEHBS/USMISSION USEU 0242
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000522

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: MILINKEVICH OPTS FOR FREEDOM OF ACTION

REF: A. MINSK 476

- [1](#)B. MINSK 502
- [1](#)C. MINSK 490
- [1](#)D. MINSK 453

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In a recent meeting with Ambassador, Aleksandr Milinkevich pointed to the release of political prisoners as a sign Lukashenko's opponents could successfully put pressure on the regime. He outlined ideas for his new "For Freedom" movement, insisting it would complement rather than compete with political parties in the opposition coalition. While the movement will pursue its own strategy, he said it would work with the coalition where possible. However, it would only support those coalition candidates for parliament in 2008 that distanced themselves from Russia. End summary.

Release of Political Prisoners Demonstrates Leverage

[1](#)2. (C) Former presidential candidate and founder of the fledgling "For Freedom" movement (FF) Aleksandr Milinkevich told Ambassador on June 13 that the recent release of political prisoners (refs A and B) represented a joint success for the United States and the opposition. He had not expected the government to release prisoners and the fact it did so indicates a degree of leverage over the regime. He stated sanctions could be effective (although he would not say so publicly), and his movement would work to explain to Belarusians the blame for sanctions lies squarely with the GOB.

For Freedom Movement: Strategy Still a Work in Progress

[1](#)3. (C) Milinkevich informed Ambassador he was about to depart for Warsaw with ten of his top people to finalize FF's strategy. He indicated the movement would pick five to seven topics for national campaigns. (Note: The most concrete examples he provided -- education and protection of the repressed -- are projects his wife, Inna Kuley, already works on in her capacity as head of the Committee for the Protection of the Repressed "Solidarity." End note.) FF would also conduct local campaigns, such as its current efforts in Grodno to protest the destruction of historic buildings.

[1](#)4. (C) Milinkevich said FF would not maintain membership

lists per se. Instead FF collects information from people who wished to participate in its actions, giving them an opportunity to list what they could contribute, e.g. someone with a car might offer transport, those with computers could type, etc. Milinkevich claimed FF already had signed up more than 5,000 residents of Minsk.

Some of My Best Friends are in the Coalition

15. (C) Milinkevich noted concerns that FF would sap political parties of their membership. However, he said anyone was free to participate in FF activities and maintain membership in a political party. Moreover, Milinkevich argued that many Belarusians who opposed Lukashenko nonetheless had no interest in joining a political party. His goal was to give these non-partisans an outlet for activism, and also to seek to coordinate NGO activities. He admitted NGOs generally did not like to coordinate their actions, but he felt they would on important projects.

16. (C) Milinkevich seconded comments from United Civic Party Chair Anatoliy Lebedko (ref C) that he and the coalition co-chairs were open to participating jointly in future meetings with Ambassador. He said he would meet with the political party heads in mid-June to explain his mission to them. He stressed it would be "no tragedy" if both the coalition and FF pursued separate strategies. Regardless, Milinkevich complained about criticism of him on coalition party websites.

FF will Pick and Choose Whom to Support for Parliament

MINSK 00000522 002 OF 002

17. (C) Milinkevich confided to Ambassador that FF organizers were still debating what approach they would take to the 2008 parliamentary elections. In any case he did not want to turn the movement into a political party and hence FF would not run its own candidates. He pledged to support strong coalition candidates who would allow him to speak at their rallies. He warned, however, that FF would not back candidates who favored integration with Russia.

Comment: A Little More Action, A Little Less Conversation

18. (C) Milinkevich correctly points out not all democrats want to support political parties. Hopefully the congress (ref D) clarified the positions of all opposition leaders sufficiently to keep them from wasting more energy on internal sparring of little interest to the general public. If both sides can keep the lines of communication open and cooperate on major actions planned for later this year (ref C), the divergence between Milinkevich and the parties may even allow for healthy competition. Milinkevich's optimism that the opposition can eventually attract the majority of educated Belarusians suggests he might mean it when he says he is not looking to sway activists away from the political parties into his camp.
Stewart